**THE EXPOSITION OF HOLY SCRIPTURE BY ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

**GENESIS-046. TWO RETROSPECTS OF ONE LIFE by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"And Jacob said unto Pharaoh, Few and evil have the days of the years of my life been."*

*Genesis 47:9*

*"The God which fed me all my life long unto this day; the Angel which redeemed me from all evil."*

*Genesis 48:15-16*

These are two strangely different estimates of the same life to be taken by the same man. In the latter Jacob categorically contradicts everything that he had said in the former. Few and evil, he said before Pharaoh. All my life long, the Angel which redeemed me from all evil, he said on his death-bed.

If he meant what he said when he spoke to Pharaoh, and characterised his life thus, he was wrong. He was possibly in a melancholy mood. Very naturally, the unfamiliar splendours of a court dazzled and bewildered the old man, accustomed to a quiet shepherd life down at Hebron. He had not come to see Pharaoh, he only cared to meet Joseph; and, as was quite natural, the new and uncongenial surroundings depressed him. Possibly the words are only a piece of the etiquette of an Eastern court, where it is the correct thing for the subject to depreciate himself in all respects as far inferior to the prince. And there may be little more than conventional humility in the words of my first text. But I am rather disposed to think that they express the true feeling of the moment, in a mood that passed and was followed by a more wholesome one.

I put the two sayings side by side just for the sake of gathering up one or two plain lessons from them.

**I. We have here two possible views of life.**

Now the key to the difference between these two statements and moods of feeling seems to me to be a very plain one. In the former of them there is nothing about God. It is all Jacob. In the latter we notice that there is a great deal more about God than about Jacob, and that determines the whole tone of the retrospect. In the first text Jacob speaks of the days of the years of my pilgrimage, the days of the years of my life, and so on, without a syllable about anything except the purely earthly view of life. Of course, when you shut out God, the past is all dark enough, grey and dismal, like the landscape on some cloudy day, where the woods stand black, and the rivers creep melancholy through colourless fields, and the sky is grey and formless above. Let the sun come out, and the river flashes into a golden mirror, and the woods are alive with twinkling lights and shadows, and the sky stretches a blue pavilion above them, and all the birds sing. Let God into your life, and its whole complexion and characteristics change. The man who sits whining and complaining, when he has shut out the thought of a divine Presence, finds that everything alters when he brings that in.

And, then, look at the two particulars on which the patriarch dwells. I am only one hundred and thirty years old, he says; a mere infant compared with Abraham and Isaac! How did he know he was not going to live to be as old as either of them? And if his days were evil, as he said, was it not a good thing that they were few? But, instead of that, he finds reasons for complaint in the brevity of the life which, if it were as evil as he made it out to be, must often have seemed wearisomely long, and dragged very slowly. Now, both things are true--life is short, life is long. Time is elastic--you can stretch it or you can contract it. It is short compared with the duration of God; it is short, as one of the Psalms puts it pathetically, as compared with this Nature round us--The earth abideth for ever; we are strangers upon it, and there is no abiding for us. It is short as compared with the capacities and powers of the creatures that possess it; but, oh! if we think of our days as a series of gifts of God, if we look upon them, as Jacob looked upon them when he was sane, as being one continued shepherding by God, they stretch out into blessed length. Life is long enough if it manifests that God takes care of us, and if we learn that He does. Life is long enough if it serves to build up a God-pleasing character.

It is beautiful to see how the thought of God enters into the dying man's remembrances in the shape which was natural to him, regard being had to his own daily avocations. For the word translated fed means much more than supplied with nourishment. It is the word for doing the office of shepherd, and we must not forget, if we want to understand its beauty, that Jacob's sons said, Thy servants are shepherds; both we and also our fathers. So this man, in the solitude of his pastoral life, and whilst living amongst his woolly people who depended upon his guidance and care, had learned many a lesson as to how graciously and tenderly and constantly fed, and led, and protected, and fostered by God were the creatures of His hand.

It was he, I suppose, who first gave to religious thought that metaphor which has survived temple and sacrifice and priesthood, and will survive even earth itself; for I am the Good Shepherd is as true to-day as when first spoken by Jesus, and the Lamb which is in the midst of the throne shall lead them, and be their Shepherd when the flock is carried to the upper pastures and the springs that never fail. The life which has brought us that thought of a Shepherd-God has been long enough; and the days which have been so expanded as to contain a continuous series of His benefits and protections need never be remembered as few, whatsoever be the arithmetic that is applied to them.

The other contradiction is equally eloquent and significant. Few and evil have my days been, said Jacob, when he was not thinking about God; but when he remembered the Angel of the Presence, that mysterious person with whom he had wrestled at Peniel, and whose finger had lamed the thigh while His lips proclaimed a blessing, his view changed, and instead of talking about evil days, he says, The Angel that redeemed me from all evil. Yes, his life had been evil, whether by that we mean sorrowful or sinful, and the sorrows and the sins had been closely connected. A sorely tried man he had been. Far away back in the past had been his banishment from home; his disappointment and hard service with the churlish Laban; the misbehaviour of his sons; the death of Rachel--that wound which was never stanched; and then the twenty years mourning for Rachel's son, the heir of his inheritance. These were the evils, the sins were as many, for every one of the sorrows, except perhaps the chiefest of them all, had its root in some piece of duplicity, dishonesty, or failure. But he was there in Egypt beside Joseph. The evils had stormed over him, but he was there still. And so at the end he says, The Angel ...redeemed me from evil, though it smote me. Sorrow became chastisement, and I was purged of my sin by my calamities. The sorrows are past, like some raging inundation that comes up for a night over the land and then subsides; but the blessing of fertility which it brought in its tawny waves abides with me yet. Joseph is by my side. I had not thought to see thy face, and God hath showed me the face of thy seed. That sorrow is over. Rachel's grave is still by the wayside, and that sorest of sorrows has wrought with others to purify character. Jacob has been tried by sorrows; he has been purged from sins. The Angel delivered me from all evil. So, dear friends, sorrow is not evil if it helps to strip us from the evil that we love, and the ills that we bear are good if they alienate our affections from the ills that we do.

**II. Secondly, note the wisdom and the duty of taking the completer and brighter view.**

These first words of Jacob's are very often quoted as if they were the pattern of the kind of thing people ought to say, Few and evil have been the days of the years of my pilgrimage. That is a text from which many sermons have been preached with approbation of the pious resignation expressed in it. But it does not seem to me that that is the tone of them. If the man believed what he said, then he was very ungrateful and short-sighted, though there were excuses to be made for him under the circumstances. If the days had been evil, he had made them so.

But the point which I wish to make now is that it is largely a matter for our own selection which of the two views of our lives we take. We may make our choice whether we shall fix our attention on the brighter or on the darker constituents of our past.

Suppose a wall papered with paper of two colours, one black, say, and the other gold. You can work your eye and adjust the focus of vision so that you may see either a black background or a gold one. In the one case the prevailing tone is gloomy, relieved by an occasional touch of brightness; and in the other it is brightness, heightened by a background of darkness. And so you can do with life, fixing attention on its sorrows, and hugging yourselves in the contemplation of these with a kind of morbid satisfaction, or bravely and thankfully and submissively and wisely resolving that you will rather seek to learn what God means by darkness, and not forgetting to look at the unenigmatical blessings, and plain, obvious mercies, that make up so much of our lives. We have to govern memory as well as other faculties, by Christian principle. We have to apply the plain teaching of Christian truth to our sentimental, and often unwholesome, contemplations of the past. There is enough in all our lives to make material for plenty of whining and complaining, if we choose to take hold of them by that handle. And there is enough in all our lives to make us ashamed of one murmuring word, if we are devout and wise and believing enough to lay hold of them by that one. Remember that you can make your view of your life either a bright one or a dark one, and there will be facts for both; but the facts that feed melancholy are partial and superficial, and the facts that exhort, Rejoice in the Lord alway; and again I say, Rejoice, are deep and fundamental.

**III. So, lastly, note how blessed a thing it is when the last look is the happiest.**

When we are amongst the mountains, or when we are very near them, they look barren enough, rough, stony, steep. When we travel away from them, and look at them across the plain, they lie blue in the distance; and the violet shadows and the golden lights upon them and the white peaks above make a dream of beauty. Whilst we are in the midst of the struggle, we are often tempted to think that things go hardly with us and that the road is very rough. But if we keep near our dear Lord, and hold by His hand, and try to shape our lives in accordance with His will--whatever be their outward circumstances and texture--then we may be very sure of this, that when the end comes, and we are far enough away from some of the sorrows to see what they lead to and blossom into, then we shall be able to say, It was all very good, and to thank Him for all the way by which the Lord our God has led us.

In the same conversation in which the patriarch, rising to the height of a prophet and organ of divine revelation, gives this his dying testimony of the faithfulness of God, and declares that he has been delivered from all evil, he recurs to the central sorrow of his life; and speaks, though in calm words, of that day when he buried Rachel by Ephrath, which is Bethel. But the pain had passed and the good was present to him. And so, leaving life, he left it according to his own word, satisfied with favour, and full of the blessing of the Lord. So we in our turns may, at the last, hope that what we know not now will largely be explained; and may seek to anticipate our dying verdict by a living confidence, in the midst of our toils and our sorrows, that all things work together for good to them that love God.